Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Seeking refuge in hope

Clay Nelson © 10 December 2017

When I first arrived in New Zealand there was a kiwi-ism that greatly troubled me… "She'll be right." It threw me as I can't think of an equivalent aphorism from my native tongue. Of course, in a country that could make Trump president, that's not so surprising.

What I like about it is its optimism. Don't get too worked up or create a tempest in a teacup over something that will work itself out. What I don't like about it is its optimism. It smacks of my childlike understanding of hope. Hope, in my young mind, was a kind of an insurance policy, a belief that God would not desert us if we were faithful. Hope provided for miraculous recoveries, last-minute rescues. It meant that the sun would always rise, that spring would follow winter, that seeds would grow, that birth would produce new life, that the Lone Ranger would arrive on time.

Living in the age we do has pretty much pummelled into dust this idyllic understanding of hope and just saying, "She'll be right," doesn't make it so. Unitarian theologian, teacher and author, Rebecca Parker, summarises how unright it is:

We are living in a post-slavery, post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam, post-Hiroshima world. We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive, and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and meaningless war mark our bodies. We are living in the midst of rain forest burning, the rapid death of species, the growing pollution of the air and water, and new mutations of racism and violence….

How do we live in this world? What is our religious task? The traditional response of religious liberalism is to place our hope in the future… that… a new age will dawn…. I have done my share of calling for the end of evil empires and announcing that the promised land is just around the corner, but I have come to believe that we need to let go of this religious myth. We need to face more honestly the conditions of devastation that we are in the midst of, here and now. As we enter the new millennium, we need to see ourselves as people living in the aftermath of cataclysmic violence rather than as people awaiting the overthrow of the present world order and the birth of the new. We must… see the world as it is, focusing our attention on the marks of past violence in our personal and collective experience. We must notice the breakdown, sorrow, and legacies of injustice that characterize our current world order. From this place of honesty, we must discover how we can live among the ruins." (Rebecca Parker, *Blessing the World*, pp.20-21).

Parker published this 11 years ago, when the idea of a President Trump wasn't even a straight line for a stand-up comic. It has only gotten much worse. At the time, there were not the present 65 million-plus refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons in the world, due primarily to war, racism and religious strife, trying to find safe haven. Half of them are estimated to be children.

I know on both an intuitive and experiential level that hope is essential to successfully living amongst the ruins. It is prerequisite to new life. Like waiting, with which it walks hand-in-hand, it is an Advent theme worthy of our reflection with Christmas on the horizon.

I have been living in very real terms with both waiting and hoping the last couple of weeks. I and others have been seeking to take advantage of a more sympathetic government that values kindness and justice to bring back to New Zealand the eleven Indian students to whom we gave sanctuary last February. As you will remember, the government at the time would not relent in the face of the blatant injustice they suffered and deported them, in part to make examples of them for exposing the corruption in the system. Since then the deportation order has stained them like the mark of Ham in their native country. They have been shamed and treated as pariahs, unable to find work, and facing, in some cases, insurmountable debt.

We learned during their stay with us that they were merely pawns in a $5 billion international student industry that depended on corrupt agents in India, educational institutions in New Zealand that didn't educate, an overwhelmed immigration system granting visas, and government policies that were more concerned with providing cheap labour to business than providing the students the meaningful qualifications that were promised.

While the students were in sanctuary we were comforted by visits from the Labour Party leader, the future Prime Minister and members of Parliament who now make up the Government. They spoke strongly about the injustice being done and later brought up the issue at question time in Parliament. As they were in opposition it was to no avail.

With the recent election putting our champions in government my childlike understanding of hope kicked in, "She'll be right," I thought. The Lone Ranger is on his way. We'll have them home by Christmas.

Rachel and I have some limited access to those now in power. Using those avenues, we have discovered that rectifying this injustice is far from simple. The Immigration Minister can't simply with a wave of his pen turn this around no matter how much he and his party might wish. The bureaucracy that doesn't change with Government has to be brought in line. The opposition which deported the students has to be kept at bay. The implications for hundreds of other students who have similar problems has to be considered. Immigration New Zealand's lack of resources has to be rectified. And they have to do this after just learning of all of the disasters in every aspect of our national life the former Government has kept hidden from the public until having to be revealed by law this week.

Then there is the question of "Failure of nerve" discussed last week. Will fear keep the new Government from exercising their integrity and reason, choosing to wait fruitlessly for Godot to come and make it right? Too early to tell if she'll make it right.

What felt like it should be a walk in the park to make right, now feels post-apocalyptic. The outcome we have hoped for is uncertain. All I wanted for Christmas was the students' return, but at the moment it looks naïve to hope they will be under the tree.

So, what is hope in such times? It turns out hope is not depending on the Lone Ranger. Hope, at its heart, is relational. It is fostered in community.

In 2001, Linda Hansen published an article entitled "Journey toward Hope" in the *UU World*.

In it she shared a story from a colleague, Terry Sweetser. The Sunday before Thanksgiving he told the familiar story of the Pilgrims coming to the New World in search of religious freedom, but he emphasised a dimension of the story unfamiliar to most Americans. Not all of the passengers who sailed on the Mayflower were Pilgrims; in fact, only forty-one belonged to that group. In order to fill the ship and to bring people with skills the Pilgrims themselves didn't have, the Pilgrims had to offer passage to sixty-one other men and women who had their own reasons for wanting to leave England. The Pilgrims called these people "Strangers."

Relations between the Pilgrims and the Strangers were not easy. When the Mayflower landed far north of the Virginia territory for which it had been headed, some of the Strangers argued that they were now freed from any original agreements and could strike out on their own. The Mayflower Compact, an agreement to "covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic," suggests that both the Pilgrims and the Strangers recognised that their chances of success, and even of survival, were better if they worked together than if they went their separate ways.

We need intimate relationships, but we need other kinds of relationships just as much. We need strangers, people whose value is more in their difference from us than their likeness to us, people who will shake us up and make us look at the world differently.

In our congregation at our best, strangers are viewed not as threats, but as having "inherent worth and dignity," as being indispensable parts of the "interdependent web" to which we all belong. Our Principles don't tell us that only our friends have inherent value; we insist everyone does. Our Principles call us to practise what the Rev William Schulz calls "the fragile art of hospitality."

All of this sounds so good in our Principles, but is so difficult to live out. Out of his own experience of community, Parker Palmer discovered this timeless truth: "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives," he writes in *The Company of Strangers*. "And when that person moves away, someone else arises to take his or her place!" Palmer reminds us that the person who most troubles us is likely to be the person who draws out what we least like about ourselves, an experience from which we can learn and grow if we have the courage to face it.

It turns out that hope that makes a difference requires trust and trust requires being vulnerable. She'll be right only if we put ourselves at risk.

But what a risk! In a world in which we can be betrayed by our closest friends, isn't it folly to open ourselves to strangers? Just ask a concentration camp survivor.

In Elie Wiesel's fourth novel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, his main character, Michael—like Wiesel, a concentration camp survivor—opens himself once again to the risk of relationship. His experience in the camps has left him without family or friends and without any hope for meaning in human life. In an exchange of life stories with a Spaniard named Pedro, who has also experienced profound loss, Michael begins to understand his own past and feels the need to return to his hometown, even though this town is now behind the Iron Curtain and Michael would be imprisoned if caught there. But more than that, Michael rediscovers the joy of friendship. Before they part, Pedro says to Michael, "From now on you can say, 'I am Pedro,' and I, 'I am Michael.'"

The worst happens to Michael: He is imprisoned, tortured, left virtually alone. His cellmate is a young man—a stranger—so overwhelmed by his own suffering that he has sought escape from the world by completely withdrawing from it, by retreating to some psychic space seemingly oblivious to anyone or anything. Michael was once a stranger locked in his own suffering, and Pedro reached out to him. Michael decides to try to do the same for this young man. He tells this stranger that someday,
"You'll tell me your name and you'll ask me, 'Who are you?' and I'll answer, 'I'm Pedro.' And that will be a proof that man survives, that he passes himself along. Later, in another prison, someone will ask your name and you'll say, 'I'm Michael.' And then you will know the taste of the most genuine of victories."

Instead of desiring the escape of mental withdrawal for himself, Michael instead reaches out in the hope of drawing this young man back into human life. We do not learn whether Michael succeeds. But we do know that he tries, that Michael—once a stranger himself—offers community to another stranger in turn. We do know that Michael has found his humanity again and therein has found meaning and hope.

In a world of greater and greater mistrust, people are desperate for the hope found in community—the hope that it is possible not just to tolerate, but to benefit from, to live fuller lives because of, "the company of strangers." It may be that the greatest contribution our religious communities can make to the larger world is not our social justice projects—important as those are—but our modelling for the larger world an alternative reality to the mistrust, inequality, and narrow self-interest that is rampant there.

Last February we took a risk in welcoming the Indian students and they in turn took a risk in accepting the invitation. We and they put trust on the line in hopes of furthering justice. While we did not achieve it then, a bond was formed. They are us and we are them. We have remained in relationship since they were deported sifting through the ashes of injustice to build a better world.

"The way to change the world," contemporary Unitarian Universalist activist Betty Reid Soskin tells us, "is to be what we want to see." What hope we might offer to the world the closer our congregations come to living out our Principles, the closer we come to being communities of genuine respect and democracy, genuinely celebrating difference.
Then we can say, with meaning, "She'll be right."